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Racialization in Islam and Christianity: A Theological Interfaith Exploration

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RACIALIZATION IN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY:
A THEOLOGICAL INTERFAITH EXPLORATION

“Racialization in Islam and Christianity”

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RACIALIZATION IN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

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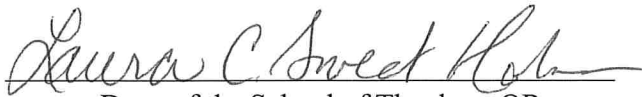
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Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction and Genesis.....4

Chapter Two: Review of Muslim Literature and Scripture11

Chapter Three: Review of Christian Literature and Scripture25

Chapter Four: Theological Synthesis.....38

Chapter Five: Praxis: Reflections and Potential Framework for Ministry48

Bibliography54

Chapter One: Introduction and Genesis

The United States in its current form is riddled with the rotten holes of many issues: sexism, heteronormativity, nationalism, classism, ageism, ableism, and racism, amongst a plethora of other complex and systemic forms of violence. Each of these can be seen in a variety of ways in a number of institutions; some ways explicitly and some ways implicitly. No matter how, these “isms” affect many people, often in an oppressive and negative manner. The rhetoric of right-wing Republicans and the current Presidential cabinet has only served to further vilify people of color, solidify the systemic power of White folks, and create further hostility and disdain between many people of many ethnicities, genders, backgrounds, and languages across the country.¹ Understanding that the United States has been racialized in every capacity, it is easy to say there are few institutions in this country, upon a closer inspection, that do not favor the White body over others, in particular, the bodies of White males.

One obvious example of this: post 9/11, the Muslim has been demonized as violent and radical, willing to kill for their beliefs anybody who does not agree. They have been labeled as terrorists despite the glaring facts: that most terrorists in the USA have been White males. For instance, the Nevada shooter, the Unabomber, and even most serial killers are White males.²

¹ Isabella Gelfand and Vanessa Williamson, “Trump and racism: what does the data say?” *Brookings*, 14 August 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2019/08/14/trump-and-racism-what-do-the-data-say/>. The Brookings Institution asserts that Donald Trump’s rhetoric has played into encouraging violence in America, as his 2016 campaign was driven and supported by sexism, racism, and xenophobia. They note a clear correlation between Trump’s campaign and incidents of prejudice violence: the FBI data shows that there has been a spike in hate crimes in areas that supported Trump in the election, and that hate crimes in areas where Trump rallies were held doubled.

² Annie Reneau, “Most domestic terrorism comes from white supremacists, FBI tells lawmakers,” *Upworthy*, 25 July 2019, <https://www.upworthy.com/most-domestic-terrorism-comes-from-white-supremacists-fbi-tells-lawmakers>. FBI Director Christopher Wray has asserted that the majority of domestic terrorism cases in the 2019 fiscal year have been tied to homegrown White supremacist movements, and that White supremacy and White extremist ideology in the United States are a pervasive and lethal threat to the country. They go as far as to say it is the biggest violent threat to this country. In regard to this, Senator Dick Durbin asserted that the Trump administration is not taking this statistic seriously, downplaying the threat of White supremacy and White nationalism. The Investigative Fund (now Type Investigations) compiled a database of all terrorism attacks between 2008 and 2016, revealing that the number of White supremacist and White terrorist attacks outnumbered those of Islamist plots 2 to 1.

Even still, it is often Muslims who are accused of acts of terror, or Black men that are shot as security threats or accused of being dangerous.³ This system that condemns innocent people simply for the way they look reveals the colonized imagination and racialization of the United States of America.⁴ The reality of racism is one that the United States of America should never have ignored, but absolutely must not ignore any longer. Too much is at stake.

With this being said, one must likewise acknowledge that religion is a vital part of life. People cannot, when having conversations about how to address socio-economic and political violence and injustices, ask those participating to leave themselves behind. Rather, it is vital that each of us come to the table as our whole selves: our contexts, baggage, glories, and image of God all wrapped in one. Religion is a way for people to find hope in the midst of trial, to find a way to explain the world around them or dwell in comfort for what they cannot understand. It enables humans to see outside of themselves, to believe in more than just their egotistical self-sufficiency and satisfaction. Strictly defined, religion is the organized worship of a supernatural, or a system of attitudes, practices, and beliefs. Christianity and Islam as general practices fit into this category.⁵

This study will aim to explore and compare theological responses to racialization in the religious traditions of Islam and Christianity in the United States. In my thesis, racialization will be broadly defined as the historic way in which people groups, social structures, and institutions

³ Clark Merrfield, “Black men 2.5 times more likely than white men to be killed by police, new research shows,” *Journalist’s Resource*, 5 August 2019, <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/government/criminal-justice/killed-police-black-men-likely-white-men/>. Statistics show that police brutality is the number one cause of death for Black men in the United States of America. Research done by the National Academy of Sciences estimates that a Black man in the United States has a 1 in 1000 chance of being shot by police during his lifetime, and that Black men are 2.5 times more likely to be shot by police than White men.

⁴ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (London, England: Yale University Press, 2010), 209.

⁵ This is not an extensive study of all sects or denominations of either religion. I understand that the broad terms “Christianity” and “Islam” have a significant range of meanings.

are ascribed meaning and hierarchy based on cultural markers of ethnicity. Within the context of racialization, racism is a social construct that is used to subjugate certain ethnic groups based on physical traits and keep others in power: a system of advantages and disadvantages. In doing this comparative study, the goal is to make evident the ways in which academics from both religious traditions are writing about the theological phenomenon of Whiteness and the system of racism in the United States of America in varied and complementary ways.

I hope to compare phenomena in these two religions because I firmly believe there is opportunity for interfaith collaboration and constructive dialogue that moves communities of faith toward the dismantling of racism in the United States. By identifying areas of common ground between Islam and Christianity, there is hope that these two religious traditions can move beyond shared social justice activism and into a place where the conversation is authentic, relational, and generative. In short, I hope this thesis, in the trajectory that follows, will be a piece of research that inspires meaningful dialogue between Muslims and Christians, and is a helpful tool that informs their theological understanding of racialization in the United States.

This, however, does not take into account the ways that human conversation, talking with and listening to one another, can remind us and drive us towards a greater common goal. It is my belief, one that has been asserted by many others before me, that the “construction of race and religion intersect in meaningful ways.”⁶ It is important here to note that neither race nor religion are stable categories; both are negotiable, both are in flux, neither can be strictly defined.⁷ For the sake of this project, racism will be defined as such: a uniquely United States of

⁶ Yvonne Y. Haddad and Jane I. Smith, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of American Islam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 206.

⁷ Ibid.

American social construct⁸ that grants⁹ advantages and disadvantages to categories of people based on perceived and performed race.¹⁰ There is no White supremacy without anti-Black sentiments. Merriam-Webster defines racism as “A belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race; a doctrine based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles.” It is a notion used to discriminate against others, particularly people of color. Racialization, hence, is the systemization of assumption of static race categories becoming implied, namely, the process by which categories of race become implicit in systems and ultimately serve racist ends.

Again, for the purpose of this paper, I will be examining and synthesizing the ways in which Muslim and Christian theologians discuss the topic of racism in their respective works. The question of where these different religions’ theologies overlap and diverge in how they discuss racism is one of vital importance in this diverse country and age. With this said, the proceeding pages will follow this trajectory. To begin, the first chapter of this paper will contain a pseudo literature analysis of the works of Muslim theologians Carolyn Moxley Rouse, Sherman A. Jackson, and Su’ad Abdul Khabeer. Carolyn Moxley Rouse, from her context as a Muslim American, discusses how Islam arrived to the United States due to the forced enslavement of Africans. She makes the vital point that there is no unified version of African American Muslims, because she asserts that race is a social construct that is unstable. Despite this, she asserts that Islam has been and will continue to be vital to the lives of many Black

⁸ Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017), 96-97.

⁹ Hazel Rose Markus and Paula M. L. Moya, eds., *Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010), 28. It is important here to note that racism is an action. It is something that is performed: it is an ideology that is acted upon and acted out, implicitly and explicitly.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Americans, and a key way that many Black folks have sought to live beyond racial categories and the oppression that comes with life in the United States.

Sherman A. Jackson notes that Blackness, similar to what Rouse claims, is a sociohistorical reality, not a biological one. In this, Black people have a shared set of circumstances in terms of oppression and the ascription of the meaning of skin color. However, Jackson does not assert that *deracializing* the United States is the answer, as he believes it will merely exacerbate differences. He asserts that Islam offers a solution to the systemic evil of racism and a way for Blackamericans to both subvert White supremacy and reclaim their own humanity.

Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, as a Muslim woman, offers a unique perspective into how Black Muslim women are both raced and gendered. She discusses how the United States is set up to favor the White, heteronormative Christian male, which is a violent differentiator of Black Muslims. However, she asserts that Islam offers Blackamericans a way to honor God, honor themselves, and honor each other.

Following the brief overview of certain aspects of Muslim theological literature on racism, I will briefly discuss the literature of certain Christian theologians. To begin this section will be the work of James Cone, one of the forerunners of Black Theology, which addresses the implicit and explicit ways in which racism is a reality at work in the United States. For Black people, Christianity has been used as a tool to uphold racism and likewise further seek their oppression, however, for Cone, the person of the historical Jesus, who is the deliverer of the oppressed and liberator of the marginalized, is the crux of Christian faith. Hence, Cone asserts that Jesus is not only in solidarity with Black people, but is their savior.

Willie James Jennings writes about how theology has become racialized and likewise contributed to racism, serving as a foundational piece of the ability for the creation of racialized beings. Jennings uses specific historical examples to assert the ways in which the development of theology has justified racism; Jennings traces the ways in which colonialism and the dismissal of the lived experiences and bodies of Black people through missionary activity has led to racism in its current form in the United States. For Jennings, it is important to note that racialization is not just a historical reality, but a theological one. However, it also offers hope and a new, creative way forward. Hence, even in a tradition that has become conflated with colonialism and oppression, there is still hope and possibility in Christianity.

Finally, J Kameron Carter follows a similar train of thinking to Jennings, noting that race as a social construct and Christian theology have come to contribute to the viewing of humans as racial beings in the United States. Carter asserts that it is only through religion that racism and White supremacy have been able to take hold. For Carter, this has to do with the way in which modern understandings of Christ, influenced by the Enlightenment, have divorced Jesus Christ from his identity as Jewish and has rendered salvation to mean becoming like the White male. He asserts that the work of previous Black theologians, while important and foundational, was incomplete and continued to affirm the binaries of race by playing into the White hierarchy and chain of being. He asserts a need to move beyond these primitive binaries, and rather than merely affirming Blackness and racial identity, there is a theological need to move beyond it. Even still, Carter asserts that Christianity and its tradition can be engaged in new ways, ones that enable people to find new identity in Christ beyond race and, hence, can offer the United States a new way forward.

Next, I will attempt to offer a synthesis of these theologies, suggesting the ways in which the metaphors and common language between academics of these two different religions can become a shared common perspective. From there, I will offer ways in which followers of these traditions can take these assertions to heart and take the next step towards racial reconciliation in the United States of America. Finally, to conclude this project, my final chapter will be one that offers a theoretical practical example of how one could apply this synthesis to their own life.

What I, through this thesis project, hope to offer is not only an understanding that, for some Black people who adhere to both Islam and Christianity, their identity as African American and their faith are inextricable to their lives but a unique assertion that, through parallels in the traditions, interfaith collaboration can exist to address systemic issues of racism in the United States of America. In honoring certain theologians by engaging their work, comparing Islam and Christianity for common ground, and examining certain perspectives in these two religions, there is opportunity for interfaith collaboration and constructive dialogue that moves communities of faith toward the dismantling of racism in the United States. There are likewise, from this, areas in which White United States citizens must begin to do the hard work of dismantling racism.

Chapter Two: Review of Muslim Literature and Scripture

Before I can make any synthesis and additional assertions on a third way forward, it is imperative that I acknowledge the work of those who have gone before me. It is likewise imperative that I acknowledge that the topics of racialization and racism are broad, and that it goes far beyond the reaches of the Black-White binary. However, the discourse encompassing how religion addresses race in the United States is dominated by the concepts of Blackness and Whiteness, though racialization and literature are not limited only to those categories. For instance, author and professor Sylvia Chan-Malik is an Asian American Muslim woman who discusses racialization in the United States from her own unique and important perspective.¹¹ Hence, Islamic literature on racism is not limited to the Black-White dichotomy.

This being said, while I acknowledge that in choosing to highlight Black voices in their discussion of Whiteness I am further supporting this grotesque binary, I have chosen to highlight African American Muslim voices for the sake of this project simply for the sake of uniformity and a limitation of space. Hence, I specifically chose the following authors. Carolyn Moxley Rouse, as an African American Muslim who is likewise a woman, shares both anthropologically how the religion of Islam and its diverse theologies have enabled many Black folks to find a common way of addressing racism. Sherman A. Jackson I chose for his emphasis that Islam and its theological tenants are a way for Black people to protest racism. Finally, I chose Su'ad Abdul Khabeer for her understanding that faithlessness enables and empowers White supremacy, and a restored allegiance in God would unravel this unfair system. These emphases are ones that I will show, though much later in this paper, to parallel those of Christian theologians who likewise seek to address racism in their works.

¹¹ Sohail Daulatzai and Junaid Rana, eds. *With Stones in Our Hands: Writings on Muslims, Racism, and Empire* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

Carolyn Moxley Rouse is an African American woman who is Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology at Princeton University. In her writing, Rouse addresses the unique intersection of racism and Islam in the United States of America.¹² Her article begins by briefly discussing the arrival of Islam in the United States, noting that a number of the slaves abducted from Africa and brought to the United States were Muslim. This was followed by, in the twentieth century, a great number of African Americans converting to Islam, and in the latter half of the twentieth century many African Muslims immigrating to the United States. In no way, shape, or form does this imply any kind of unified version of Islam: African American Muslims identify with a diverse range of approaches to religion.

In this, Rouse asserts that “Given these different histories and beliefs, it is no small task to confirm that a categorical group, loosely identified as ‘African American Muslims’ exists.”¹³ Rouse continues on to say that “The claim that African American Muslims have a unique history or perspective of the world implies that their experiences are different from those of African Americans who are not Muslim and Muslims who are not Black.”¹⁴ With this in mind, it is important to note that Rouse understands race and racial categories to be unstable¹⁵ and dynamic categories, always in flux and never concrete, which in turn, results in the category of

¹² Yvonne Y. Haddad and Jane I. Smith, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of American Islam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 86.

¹³ Ibid, 87.

¹⁴ Ibid, 87.; Emma Green, “Black Muslims Struggle with Racism and Islamophobia,” *The Atlantic*, 11 March 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/muslim-americans-race/519282/>. Other sources note that, within the Muslim community, differences such as the difference between the African American Muslim experience and immigrant Muslim experience is a point of racial and ethnic contention. The Atlantic mentions in an article titled “Black Muslims Struggle with Racism and Islamophobia” that “While some Muslims seem to be paying more attention to racism because of Donald Trump, others fear that any sign of internal division is dangerous for Muslims in a time of increased hostility.”

¹⁵ Haddad and Smith, 88. Rouse affirms what many other Black theologians and scholars do: that race is a social construct. She also affirms the work of critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw, asserting that intersectionality is an important term in this discourse: it is vital that it be understood that people have more than one relevant social identity. For example, the oppression of Black women is different than that of White women, because White women, while oppressed for their sex, still bear White privilege, which Black women do not have access to.

Black/African American Muslim as imprecise and inexact. However, it does identify a certain metanarrative and epistemological history, and implies that Islam has, in fact, been a vital part of life in the United States for many Black citizens, despite it being impossible to pinpoint a singular African American Muslim history or consciousness.¹⁶

Rouse notes that Islam is a minority religion in the United States, and one that isn't understood well by the general population. Because of this, African American Muslims are constantly forced to be conscious of their complex and numerous identities, because they are constantly forced to rationalize their existence and decisions. This is because, due to the racism that is implicit in United States society, African American Muslims are continuously fighting against misrecognition, which she states is a defining feature of racism,¹⁷ while also fighting against notions of the Islamophobia that are rampant in the USA. Hence, African American Islam "is not reducible to a set of beliefs but rather is best described as the use of Islam as a mediating strategy for making sense of and challenging forms of social injustice¹⁸ peculiar to the United States."¹⁹ She asserts that this is because:

"African American Islam," in contrast, uncouples race from belief, shifts the focus from people to ideas, and highlights the relationship between African American social history and Islamic exegesis....²⁰ Paradoxically, therefore, as African American Muslims have tried to distance themselves from a social category that constrains them, racial identification continues to be a necessary tool of empowerment.... Always attentive to constraint and empowerment, the exegetical approach of African American Islam is deeply influenced by both the refusal to legitimate mainstream categories of difference while also embracing those categories as necessary for understanding the values of the faith and mobilizing around those values.²¹

¹⁶ Ibid, 88.

¹⁷ Ibid, 88.

¹⁸ A number of sources note that Muslims are all equal in the eyes of God, and hence, Muslims do not acknowledge that race exists in Islam.

¹⁹ Ibid, 89.

²⁰ Ibid, 88-89.

²¹ Ibid, 89, 91. "Malcolm X, or El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, as he was also known, dealt with this by forming two organizations: Muslim Mosque, Inc., a religious group, and the Organization of Afro-American Unity, a political group." The Nation of Islam "has been used to assert the moral and spiritual authority of people of color."

Rouse tells the story of a Black Muslim named Abd Rahman Ibrahima. He was a prince from Guinea who was captured and sold into Mississippi slavery. Nearly forty years after his enslavement, a campaign for his freedom was started because it was believed that, due to his royalty, he was capable of morals and intellect that exceeded those of other slaves. Hence, it was argued that he should be allowed to return to his home country. About this occurrence, Rouse writes: “The reclassification of Ibrahima as Arab, or closer to White than Black, speaks to how *Negro* did not solely reference the color of a person’s skin but also denoted *illiterate, heathen, stateless, lacking culture, and uneducable*.”²² Even before the concept of Blackamerican,²³ Blacks were seen as inferior. In the 19th century, this is further confirmed by the fact that only White men could hold full US citizenship, and this was justified by the fact that White men believed they had the capacity to reason and do hard work, and likewise asserted they were chosen by God.²⁴ Again, Rouse writes:

Citizenship, therefore, was understood to be a privilege granted to those with the moral character to take advantage of and properly use the freedoms granted by the constitution. By casting Blacks as lazy, uncivilized, and uneducable, racism turned the term *Black citizen* into a conceptual oxymoron. Even in political discourse in the early part of the twenty-first century, African Americans were often represented as preferring welfare to work, and disparities in rates of incarceration between Blacks and Whites were justified partly by perceptions that Blacks did not have the capacity for self-control and lacked moral character. Oddly enough, even Barack Obama, the first African American president, was taunted throughout his time in office with accusations that he was not an American citizen.²⁵

²² Ibid, 90. Dr. Bantum, in one of his lectures, stated “The color White was associated with beauty, virginity, purity, and goodness. But the notion of White was also tied conversely to the notion of black that represented death, filth, the fundamental opposition of White.”

²³ Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher and Thea Tenda Abu El-Hajj, “EXIT EAST? The Fight Against US Anti-Muslim Racism,” *The Assembly* 1 (2018). “Thus, while anti-Muslim sentiment—what is commonly known as Islamophobia—seems to be a recent phenomenon, in fact, Muslims have been discriminated against throughout the history of the US and prior, albeit in varying degrees (Mamdani, 2004). However, without a doubt, 9/11 was a watershed moment for Muslims in the US bringing them into the public eye in a way that was unprecedented, reinvigorating a narrative about Muslims and Islam as incompatible with US values and hence citizenship.”

²⁴ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015). American exceptionalism.

²⁵ Rouse, 91.

Rouse talks about how gender plays into the racism experienced by Black Muslims, asserting that Black women have, since chattel slavery, been treated as working animals with no value but to do hard labor, but how, for Muslim women, Islam gives some Black women the understanding that power and gender roles do not have to be mutually exclusive alongside of offering empowerment from a racial standpoint.²⁶ She then continues on to discuss how institutionalized White supremacy and racism has taught many Black people to hate themselves. Hence: “Most African American Muslims have found that their faith legitimates their value as human beings through religious doctrine about human goodness.”²⁷

She says that one of the responses to White supremacy has been the internalization of self-hatred by many Blacks. Islam has offered protection and a way to subvert White supremacy²⁸ and American exceptionalism - for African American Muslims, Islam has been a way to reject the tools that have built Whiteness into a system in this country - a way to reject the celebration of selective histories and epistemologies.²⁹ She writes that: “African American Muslims feel that their faith liberates them from culturally patterned ways of thinking about race and, particularly for the women, about gender.”³⁰

²⁶ I am not following this trajectory more thoroughly because Rouse does this herself in her writings, and it would add complication and length to this project that there is not the space for. Rouse writes “Black women were never expected to lead fulfilling lives but rather to lives marked by hard labor, endured along with the indignities that come with institutionalized racism.” Sylvia Chan-Malik and her book *Being Muslim* is likewise a great resource for those who wish to pursue the intersection of patriarchy and racism from a Muslim perspective more deeply.

²⁷ Ibid, 94.

²⁸ Ibid, 2. About this article, Yvonne Y Haddad says, “Rouse emphasizes that the adoption of Islam by African Americans is a clear response to White supremacy and that their struggles for equal citizenship in American reflect many of the same issues of belonging that immigrant Muslims have had to deal with throughout their history in the United States.”

²⁹ Ibid, 95.

³⁰ Ibid, 96.

In summation, Rouse asserts that, while African American Islam is a diverse group of people, theologies, ethnicities, and beliefs, it is very much impacted by the institution of racism in the United States and is what it is contextually because of its necessary response to racism.

Moving forward to a second academic: Sherman A. Jackson is the King Faisal Chair of Islamic Thought and Culture and Professor of Religion and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California, and has composed many books and articles on the topic of racism in the United States and the way it affects Blackamericans, particularly through an Islamic lens. In his book *Islam and the Blackamerican*, Jackson asserts that ‘The Blackamerican.... Is not a biological reality; he is a socialhistorical one.’³¹ He likewise asserts that, while race is not an ontological reality³² and that makes it scientifically unjustifiable, it is still a very real issue plaguing the United States. He likewise asserts that the commonality that all Blackamericans have is a shared set of sociopolitical and historical circumstances, a condition of circumscription, reaction, and contingency all predicated by skin color.³³ Namely, despite the diversity of Black folks in every capacity, they share a common history and reality of oppression due to the color of their skin by White supremacy.

It is important to note that Jackson believes race to be a strictly and uniquely United States phenomenon, one invented by White men to stand as a differentiator. In this, Jackson³⁴ believes that *deracializing* Black Americans will only stand to exacerbate racial issues, because in attempting to empower and restore humanity to Black folks, it still depends on and hence adds power and legitimacy to White supremacy. He likewise asserts that human rights and new laws

³¹ Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14. By this he means that race is not a biological category, but a social construct that has been perpetuated and asserted at concrete and “True” over time.

³² Ibid, 2.

³³ Ibid, 14.

³⁴ J Kameron Carter would agree with this, asserting that we must become *post-racial* rather than *pre-* or *de-* racial.

are not cures to the disease that is racism: for him, freedom from racism and the addressing of the systemic evil it lies in a theological practice of virtue (*akhlaq*). Jackson believes that there is no ontological reasoning or assertion that will resolve the issue of racism; it is only “hidden, prerational, preconscious selves” that practice “commitment to obedience to God’s commands” that will enable the destruction of predatory ethnocentrism. For Jackson, subverting White supremacy and restoring humanity to Blackamericans depends on a deep understanding of the Qu’ran,³⁵ Allah’s commands, practice of morals and manners,³⁶ and theological dependence.³⁷ To sum up his stance, Carolyn Moxley Rouse writes: “What Jackson argues is that African American Muslims who have used Islam to challenge race as an essential marker of difference at the same time that racial history in America has shaped the Black American experience with Islam.”³⁸ He himself writes that “Black religion is an instrument of holy protest against White supremacy and its material and psychological effects. While it is an inextricably religious orientation, it refuses to separate the quest for otherworldly salvation from the struggle for temporal liberation and a dignified existence.”³⁹

³⁵ Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 18. In his other book, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*, Jackson writes that: “Among the major concerns of this book is to call into question the contention (explicit in Pinn, more implicit in Jones) that theism, particularly one that simultaneously embraces divine omnipotence and divine omnibenevolence, is incapable of sustaining respectable theological answers to the problem of black theodicy and is therefore incompatible with the cause of black liberation.” In this book, Jackson gives insight into a number of different Muslim theological camps and how they address the concept of suffering, particularly how Black Muslims view theodicy in terms of racism.

³⁶ SPEARIT, “Islam in America: Salve for Strained Race Relations,” *The Maydan*, 6 November 2018, <https://www.themaydan.com/2018/11/islam-america-salve-strained-race-relations/>. In Sunni Islam, it is piety, not skin color, that is the mark of superiority. This is in part believed because different skin colors and languages are a sign of Allah’s creative power. SPEARIT writes that “Islamic teachings have a deep commitment to principles that challenge racist ideologies,” namely, that Islam stands as a natural foil to the system of racism. Muslims, based on teachings in both the Qur’an and Hadith, believe that all humans are equal, and they condemn division and hierarchy based on skin color.

³⁷ Haddad and Smith, 35. “Returning to the original religion of Islam would free all African Americans because in Islam people of all races are equal and all humans are slaves only to God and not to other human beings (Beynon, 1938, Gardell, 1994). Both preachers believed that Christianity was for the White race and Islam for blacks.”

³⁸ *Ibid*, 89.

³⁹ Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 31. Jackson is certainly not the only Islamic scholar to believe this. For instance, Huda Dodge writes “Islam is known as a faith for all people and for all times.... In the heart of a Muslim there is no

While Jackson affirms the notion that Islam is a way for Blackamericans to protest⁴⁰ because the construction of the Black identity via White supremacy has forced the need to protest upon them, Jackson asserts that it cannot be protest alone that violates the system of racial oppression:

In a real sense, Blackamericans (like other orphans of modernity) were ‘created’ by the forces of White supremacy and the theoretical disciplines of the Enlightenment. This ‘second creation’ complicated the task of breaking through to the First Creation and the primordial meanings enmeshed in the God-created self. In many ways, Blackamerican religiosity and protest are manifestations of a desire to transcend this second creation and reconnect with the first.⁴¹

Jackson writes that the protest sentiment of Black folks cannot be abandoned, because to abandon the protest would be to open Black folks up to the assimilationism, domination, and cultural apostasy they have been forced into for so long.⁴² Jackson, however, reminds his readers that it is important that resistance and protest not become conflated with Islam, despite them being vital to Islam and Islam needing to retain concrete meaning in the everyday lives of Blackamericans.⁴³ It is important that Muslim Blackamericans, to subvert and protest White supremacy, remain faithful to Allah, committed to obedience and personal piety.

If Blackamerican Sunni Islam is to subvert false *mysterium tremendum*⁴⁴ and the ‘second creation’ without degenerating into just another secular ideology or cultural performance, it will have to ground its protest mission in articulations of the religion that show such a mission to be consistent with the pursuit of divine pleasure.⁴⁵

room for arrogance and racism. Allah tells us that the diversity of life, and the various languages and colors of human beings, is a sign of Allah’s majesty, and a lesson for us to learn about humility, equality, and the appreciation of differences.”

⁴⁰ See: Malcolm X, Nation of Islam, Noble Drew Ali, Fard Muhammed, Moorish Science Temple. The Nation of Islam has asserted that Muslims cannot pledge allegiance to a flag that has oppressed African Americans for so long.

⁴¹ Ibid, 173.

⁴² Ibid, 156.

⁴³ Ibid, 172.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 173. By this he means the definition of *mysterium tremendum* by German scholar Rudolf Otto, which, in short, Otto defines as the cosmic fear that accompanies an encounter with the Divine.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 175.

Destruction of White supremacy is to be done by faithfulness to God and the Qur'an, and also the application of Islam to the issue at hand. He writes "Sociopolitical resistance may be the antidote to a dominant group's self-serving laws and policies; but spiritual/psychological resistance is required to prevent their self-serving values and meanings from striking roots in the soul."⁴⁶

Likewise, Jackson asserts that the Qur'an damns the colonial domination and idolatrous notion of White supremacy in its own way:

The Qur'an itself, however, at least on my reading, evinces an emphatic opposition to White supremacy, not as an institution aimed specifically at Blackamericans but as a system of normalized domination that idolizes a second creator and promotes a false *mysterium tremendum*. Rather than recognizing Black humanity as a matter of divine fiat, White supremacy grants this recognition only on the satisfaction of its own self-serving criteria.⁴⁷

Namely, no true interpretation of the Qur'an or understanding of God will support institutions that viscerally oppress another.

Lastly, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer's article, based on her own life experience, "To Be a (Young) Black Muslim Woman Intellectual" in *With Stones in Our Hands: Writings on Muslims, Racism, and Empire* is the final text I will mention. Khabeer's article begins by stating the underlying assumption that all United States American, Black, Muslim, female bodies are both raced and gendered, which renders their experience unique; she likewise begins by talking about how the patriarchy and racism implicit in the United States of America have been subsumed into the Muslim community in the USA.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid, 190, 193.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 176.

⁴⁸ I am not talking more in depth about the intersection of patriarchy here because there is simply not the space, as I have mentioned before.

Khabeer addresses a number of stereotypes in her writing. Not only are here headings titled “All the men are Muslim” and “All the Americans are White,” she directly writes:

The term *Muslim* conjures the image of someone who is ‘Middle Eastern looking,’ has an accent and is irrationally obsessed with violence because of his uniquely fanatical attachment to religion and tradition.... the Muslim is Brown, the Muslim is foreign, the Muslim is backward, the Muslim is pathological, the Muslim is dangerous. These assumptions are replayed over and over, reinforcing not only who Muslims supposedly *are* but who they are *not*: White, native, progressive, and peace-loving, that is, US Americans. These ‘facts’ are the products of processes of racial formation that construct and reproduce the normative assumptions of ‘Muslim as other’ and ‘American as White.’⁴⁹

Khabeer goes on to discuss how, in the United States of America, White normativity and the system of race which favors Whiteness means the ideal norm is heterosexual, White, male, and Christian. This has resulted in a violent reality for people of color, particularly Black Muslims.⁵⁰ So much so that, despite the fact that most of the recent mass shootings and attacks of terror in the United States have been perpetrated by White men, White men experience no ramifications as individuals or a group because the systems at place in the United States have been built in their favor.⁵¹ She discusses this in terms of the fact that, based on this static definition of norm and Islamophobia, Muslims are not normative to the US structures, hence, not being normative, they are clearly the Other. She writes, referencing the words and work of the aforementioned Sherman A. Jackson:

Fundamentally, contemporary Muslims, in the United States and abroad, find themselves confronted with ideologies and systems in which what makes them different is recast as deficiency... In an online lecture, Islamic studies scholar Sherman Jackson articulated the possibility that White supremacy could be considered a modern form of shirk (idolatry). He argued that White supremacy traffics in notions of White normativity and racial

⁴⁹ Su’ad Abdul Kabeer, “To Be a (Young) Black Muslim Woman Intellectual,” in *With Stones in Our Hands: Writings on Muslims, Racism, and Empire*, ed. Sohail Daulatzai and Junaid Rana (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 291.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 291.

⁵¹ Ibid, 292.

hierarchies in which the loyalty and fidelity that belong only to God are misplaced onto the human beings and human systems that are raced White.⁵²

The notion of misplaced allegiance is what Khabeer notes is:

...the ultimate transgression, because it denies God's oneness and incomparability. For the Muslim, this also transgresses God's decree. In the Qur'an, God speaks about difference. God states, 'We have created you [humanity] all out of a male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Indeed the most noble of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of him' (49:13). Thus in difference, in distinction, is not deficiency but a divine decree and purpose. Humanity was created to be different, and the purpose of that difference is knowledge. Thus there is an ethical imperative here, because it is impossible to know what you despise, debase, and destroy. There is also a spiritual imperative here, because in the Islamic tradition, knowledge of God's creation is a pathway toward greater knowledge of God.⁵³

In short, it is, according to Khabeer, a lack of faith and understanding of God that leads to and empowers White supremacy.

In summary, Black Islamic scholars have a unique variety of perspectives on the issue of racism. Carolyn Moxley Rouse, from a more anthropological standpoint, discusses how, despite the impossibility of universally categorizing Black Muslims in the United States, there is a narrative that Islam has been vital in the lives of many Black people in the USA as they face racism. Sherman A. Jackson asserts that racism is a system of advantages and disadvantages unique to the United States, and that Islam is not only a form of protest to this but offers ways for Black folks to restore humanity to themselves and one another. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, from the perspective of a Black Muslim female, addresses how the United States is a breeding ground of oppression in patriarchy and racism. Black Muslims are not White Christians and hence are not normative and labeled as the Other. All in all, each is concerned with the lived experiences of Black people and likewise with Muslim faithfulness to the tenants of Islam. It is these

⁵² Ibid, 293.

⁵³ Ibid, 294.

overarching tenants, overviewed in each of their works, that I will continue to focus on in the impending sections.

Obviously, these three are not the only voices in the Black Muslim conversation on racism, or even the Muslim conversation on racism in the United States. However, what they offer, despite not being all-inclusive or perfect, is a unique and needed perspective on the conversation of racism in the United States. With this said, comparatively, I have found that Blackamerican Islam academically is more accessible than Blackamerican Christianity, because Islam is empowering and liberating for Blacks, as opposed to the conversations concerning Christianity, where Blackamericans must prove their voices against a history of White European males and academia. Islam enables Blackamericans to religiously and metaphysically move out of a system not only set up against them but build on their enslaved backs. In Blackamerican Islam, there is no need for scholars or theologians to have to prove the validity of their voices or their right to join the theological conversation.

Reverence to Scripture

While theology is important in conversations on racism, it is equally as important for people of faith, and perhaps more so, to go back to scripture. In the case of Islam, this means the text and words of the Qur'an. There are a number of scholars and people of faith who have written about racism and the Qur'an, however, I will namely be briefly addressing the perspective of one in particular. Bernard Lewis, in 1970, wrote a book called *Race and Color in Islam*, where he discusses more than a number of vital points in regards to an Islamic perspective on racism. He begins by addressing Toynbee's *Study of History*, where Toynbee talks of

brunettes being Allah's first choice in terms of chosen people.⁵⁴ Even with this being said, Lewis asserts that Muslims do not have a system that divides people into race, rather, their scripture divides humans merely into "believers" and "unbelievers," those who are Muslim and those who are not, with an understanding that "unbelievers" always have the potential to become believers.⁵⁵ This way of classifying people has little to no regard for physical traits such as ethnicity or skin pigmentation; rather, a Muslim can be White, Arab, Asian, Black, as can any non-believer. In Islam, according to the Qur'an, no matter what color or ethnicity one is, Muslims all participate in the same rituals.⁵⁶ To prove this point, there have been recorded instances of White Muslims giving their daughters⁵⁷ to Black Muslim men in marriage as a condemnation of race thinking and a symbol of freedom from race thinking.

Having established these overarching ideas, Bernard continues on to do exegesis directly from an English translation of the Qu'ran. He states that, based on Sura XXXVv2, which reads:

Praise be to God, who created (out of nothing) the heavens and the earth, who made the angels, messengers with wings, two, or three, or four (pairs): He adds to Creation as He pleases: for God has power over all things. What God out of His Mercy doth bestow on humankind there is none can withhold: what He doth withhold, there is none can grant, apart from Him: and He is exalted in Power, Full of Wisdom.⁵⁸

diversity is a beautiful sign from Allah. And according to XLIXv13, which reads:

⁵⁴ Bernard Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam*, 1.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 1.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 3. Malcolm X notes this, and likewise notes that this type of unity and understanding of brotherhood and equality could never exist between Whites and people of color in the USA. Malcolm X also writes about how, upon returning to the USA post a visit to the Arab world that the United States' culture forces people to become hyperaware of color in a way that the rest of the world is not. "When I returned home I would tell Americans this observation; that where true brotherhood existed among all colors, where no one felt segregated, where there was no 'superiority' complex, no 'inferiority' complex - then voluntarily, naturally, people of the same kind felt drawn together by that which they had in common."

⁵⁷ I understand this phrasing raises issues in terms of gender equality. 1001 Arabian nights does not depict a racial utopia but rather fetishizes the ethnic sexual fantasy of an Arab woman.

⁵⁸ This translation was rendered into English by Abudullah Yusuf Ali. It is important to note that it is a *translation*, for it is not in Arabic.

O humankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may now each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (He Who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

the Qu'ran expresses no racial or color prejudice despite showing a deep awareness for differentiation.⁵⁹ Likewise, other ancient Arabian literature describes the beauty and an appreciation for the colors of humanity, expressing the physical coloric description of humans in a vast number of ways. However, none of these descriptions are ethnic in their descriptors.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid, 13.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 10. This is specifically about Islam in general, not about specifically in the USA.

Chapter Three: Review of Christian Literature and Scripture

As I have asserted in the previous chapter, it is important in this section to likewise note that the Christian theological literature on racism is not only a conversation limited to the Black-White binary. There are a number of other theologians, such as: Jonathan Tran, Ruben Rosario Rodriguez, Hak Joon Lee, Elizabeth Conde-Frazer, and many more who do not identify as Black who contribute vital information to this conversation. There are likewise other Black theologians such as John Perkins and Howard Thurman who paved the way for Christian theologies on racism. These people and their work are important to recognize, despite this paper not having the space to discuss all of their work. Likewise, I understand that, in regards to the authors I have selected to examine both previously and to come, that I have not and cannot expound upon every aspect of their work or the work of others, as much as I would like to. However, it is worth noting that I chose these authors for these specific reasons: Cone because of his emphasis on Christ and black bodies, Jennings because of his emphasis on both the identity and theological nature of racism, and Carter because of his understanding of Christ, lived, Blackness, and racism as a theological constructs. Despite the length, depth, and breadth of what each of these authors offer to the world that cannot be fully encompassed by these concise aspects, I chose these concise aspects because I am aiming for continuity in where this is all leading - an employment of these understandings and arguments that can link with Islamic voices to subvert White supremacy.

To begin the Christian section of this document is the literature of James Cone. James Cone is one of the forerunners of Christian Black liberation theology; prior to his death in 2018, he was the distinguished professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary. Throughout his work, Cone addresses how not only is racism implicit and explicit in the United

States, but it is likewise a power at work in Christian theology as it stands in this country today. He purports that American theology in and of itself *is* racist. Cone gives the example of how White slaveholders in the United States and White folk as a stereotype have used the Christian Bible to justify their lynching⁶¹ and enslavement of Black people, which has made it incredibly difficult for Black folks to find a place for their existence and identity within the tradition. For Cone, however, this does not render Christianity a White man's religion; Cone, in a number of differing capacities, asserts that Jesus Christ, the God of the Christian scriptures, is a God who identifies with and is the God of the marginalized, downtrodden, and, more specifically, the Black community. Black people, including Cone, have tried to seek the divine in ways that are separate from Anglo-European traditions and the Enlightenment's understanding of truth. This has led to the emphasis on the concrete, historical manifestation of Jesus as a Jewish man being inseparable from his identity as a Jew and his work in redeeming societal outcasts.

It is important here to note that, for Cone, Christ is the crux of the Christian faith.⁶² He firmly believes that one cannot know God or be Christian apart from Jesus, for Cone asserts that Jesus is the concrete revelation of God, the God who historically defends the defenseless and works for their liberation. He states that "Jesus' life with the poor reveals that the continuity between the Old and New Testaments is found in the divine will to liberate the oppressed from sociopolitical slavery."⁶³ Jesus, for Cone, is not just preaching a spiritual salvation for the poor and the downtrodden, but a physical salvation, one that reaches for Black people, as well.

⁶¹ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 18. Cone identifies the cross Jesus was crucified on with the lynching tree used to crucify black people in the Jim Crow era, writing that "While the lynching tree symbolized White power and 'Black death,' the cross symbolized divine power and 'Black life' - God overcoming the power of sin and death." The lynched Black Christ stands for Cone as both figure and symbol of solidarity and hope. While this is a key piece of Cone's argument, I chose not to focus intensely on that in this paper for the purpose of space.

⁶² I am mentioning this specifically because I am going to employ this in the next section, which is the synthesis.

⁶³ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 80.

Through an application of this understanding of the historical Jesus to the life and oppression of Black people, Cone is able to say: “The God in Black theology is the God of and for the oppressed, the God who comes into view in their liberation.”⁶⁴ God, the liberator of the Jews, liberator from sin, is the liberator of Black people. Cone’s understanding of Jesus Christ is one where Jesus as a historical reality who was tangibly acting within a historical reality to show solidarity and salvation to the marginalized; faith and Jesus Christ are not transcendent entities but rather immanent realities that apply to the current social situation of Black folks. In this, Christianity and the person of Jesus have enabled Black people to protest against racism in the United States of America.⁶⁵

Willie James Jennings is the associate professor of systematic theology and Africana studies at Yale university. He is an African American theologian, and has offered invaluable contributions to cultural identity work and theological anthropology. He has likewise written about the ways in which theology has contributed to the creation of racial identities and the racialization of Black people in the United States of America. For Jennings, an understanding of colonialism is key to understanding how racism came to exist in the United States,⁶⁶ and, paired with this, it is important to note that Jennings views race as a social construct, one that is upheld through repeated systemic performance. Jennings, in his book, addresses how historically⁶⁷ and

⁶⁴ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), 61.

⁶⁵ Cone, *Lynching Tree*, 22.

⁶⁶ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (London, England: Yale University Press, 2010), 33. Jennings, in his chapter on Zurara’s Tears, gives insight into how the Christian process and the identity of being a Christian took on European features. Christianity developed into being not just about the conversion of others to Christ but the conversion of others to European norms, language, etc. In this, theologically, Whites reconfigured their understanding of Israel and Israel’s election to be that the European White body was the “compass marking divine election.” This sums up much of what Jennings writes about: how the encountering of black people and the enlightenment resulted in White Europeans classifying ethnicities, skin color, language, religion, etc. and perpetuating these binaries in colonization and conversion.

⁶⁷ Ibid. I have read Jennings, and know that much of his book is about how and what have become conflated with colonialism. However, there is simply not the room to discuss the depth to which Jennings goes and the complex history Jennings traces.

even still, Christianity as an institution has been used as a colonial tool⁶⁸ to subjugate Africans and African Americans,⁶⁹ since even before the Enlightenment. He asserts that, over time, the concept of Whiteness developed from signifying culture, refinement, and an “us” designation⁷⁰ to meaning that the White European was the “compass marking divine election.”⁷¹ This development in understanding came partially due to the fact that White colonizers saw land as a possession, and not as an integral part of other communities. When colonizers took land from indigenous or Africans, the sense of identity that can flow directly from the land, or land as an identity signifier⁷² was stripped from them, and forced the oppressed to find identity in only their bodies, which they still had control over.⁷³ It is through such history and problematic practices tied in metanarrative to the present that Jennings asserts, even after the end of 19th century slavery, racism is still tied deeply to the daily practices of United States society.

With this said, however, it is important to note that Jennings does not believe racism to be merely a historical reality, rather, it is a theological one. Christianity, in its modern form, one that has over time has become conflated with colonial ideals, still bears imperialistic and oppressive marks, and has socially constructed its institution and enabled society to do the same in a way that the White male is still seen as normative, and systemically is favored against the

⁶⁸ Ibid, 146.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 43, 49. Jennings talks about the importance of geography in identity; he states how White people forced the center of many African peoples’ identity (such as the Ju/wasi and the Apache). Due to colonialism, many natives lost the earth as an identity signifier, and were left to find their identity in their bodies, which Whiteness quickly defined for them as primitive, uncultured, not Anglo-Saxon and hence not divine, as barbarian, dangerous, and heathen. Jennings gives insight into how, in this racialized, religiously disciplined “Christianity,” land is torn from people as their identifier and then commodified, and the White body becomes the new marker of identity. In this, when White Europeans encountered black Africans for the first time, they determined that the need of a salvation that only they could offer as the more civilized, educated, religious ones was necessary for the darker skinned heathens, and part of what was needed to save them was a White, western, ideology of Christianity which actually meant teaching them English and making them European. In this, they were offering the Africans a version of Jesus that was incomplete.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 30.

⁷¹ Ibid, 33.

⁷² Ibid, 40.

⁷³ Ibid, 41.

subjugation of Blacks. In this, Jennings write that Black folks have perpetually been marked as the Other, those who are primitive, less cultured, and lesser⁷⁴ because of their differences from Whiteness in language,⁷⁵ clothes, food, manners, and culture.⁷⁶ In Jennings opinion, Christianity as an institution has been used as a means to squelch the lived experiences and humanity of Black folks. This stems from White Western Christians being supersessionist, or incapable of seeing space and place for Jesus as a Jew in their tradition.

However, while historically Christianity as an institution has been used as a colonial tool of differentiation, othering, and oppression, in Jennings perspective, Christianity likewise offers a way for people in a racialized society to reimagine existence and create a space and a future where people can co-exist together as children of God.⁷⁷ Jennings asserts that, as race has been created, it can likewise be unmade: he does not assert that society should go back to a pre-race existence, but rather, through a creative theological imagination rooted in the personhood of Jesus, an understanding of the nation of Israel, and a contemplation of the Church and God, our society should become one that is post-racial. Jennings, along this thread, predicates that, in

⁷⁴ The belief that Africans were heinous, based on things like their style of clothing, food, marital and familial practices, was important in the establishment and maintenance of the European as superior. These differences and ways of classification became ingrained in what it means to be White: White does not exist without the concept of black. The power of Whiteness comes from the violent, derogatory theology, philosophy, and stereotyping of black bodies as animals threaded throughout every institution.

⁷⁵ Ibid. Language creates and perpetuates the ideals that affect, fragment, and orient all of us. The English language was considered to be the “best” by Anglo-Saxon purist such as some of our founding fathers, and was used as a tool to “convert” many to Whiteness by White men and likewise to bind others to White concepts of who they should and must be to be fully human. While Africans could be converted to Christianity, it was believed that only pure Anglo-Saxons, with the divine blood of their Anglo-Saxon blood running through their veins, were elect, chosen, able to be leaders, etc. The ideology of racism can only be upheld through relationship, practice, maintenance. If racism is systemic, then it completely relies on people to perpetuate it, engrain it into systems and each other, to survive.

⁷⁶ Jennings speaks to how converting people to Christ meant converting them to European ways of life: in language, culture, education, way of eating, way of dressing. This theology deifies Whiteness but also deems blacks and other people of color as ‘unholy,’ heathenistic, and uncivilized. White theology is intertwined with notions that blacks are the lesser other, and that the image of God is lesser in them. Jennings states that the belief was that even if Africans were converted, they could never fully and completely be members of the Church or of society.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 250.

order for this to occur, the Church must learn to affirm the particularity of Jesus' Jewish body. It is only through understanding that Jesus Jewish flesh included and integrated Jews *and* Gentiles that the Church can truly understand salvation. In short, Jewish flesh is most authentically itself when it welcomes Gentile flesh in hospitality; the Church is only the Church as it receives and includes *everyone* as Jesus did. Racism, in Jennings opinion, is the result of the Church dismissing the Jewishness of Jesus and of its own heritage; based on the history that he goes over in the majority of his book, Jennings asserts that, like the Christian tradition *and* Black bodies, our imaginations have been colonized.

Another theologian who fits somewhat into a similar train of thought is J Kameron Carter. J Kameron Carter is an African American theologian and academic who conveys a reimagining of what has been typically known as Black Christian theology, falling into liminal category of New Black theology. Carter specifically discusses the ways in which Christian theology came to contribute to the viewing of humans as racial beings,⁷⁸ and hence, racism as it stands in the United States today. In short: Carter's main assertion is that race is a *theological* problem.⁷⁹ Carter, in his introduction, states:

The . . . modern problem of imagining the human being in racial terms, and within these terms positioning Whiteness as supreme [is] a central ideological component in constructing the modern world as we have come to know it. The racial imagination arose inside of . . . and even camouflaged itself within the discourse of theology.⁸⁰

Here, it is important to note that, for Carter, race is a social construct, a system of oppression that has come to be upheld through false *religious* understandings and the performance of certain bodies being valued above others. If the Christian tradition had a theologically sound perspective

⁷⁸ J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁷⁹ Ibid, 192, 230. He extensively writes about how Christianity has become a "vehicle" for the religious articulation of whiteness, meaning that theology has become, overtime, implicitly laden with the performance of being white.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 12.

of the positive and distinct hypostasis of the Trinity, the Church would understand that difference in and of itself is a witness to God's goodness and is a part of God's plan. In short, race is an ideological discourse that systematically favors and grants power to Whiteness/White cultural supremacy,⁸¹ and this could and can only happen through religion. Carter asserts that Christianity has come to be performed in problematic, pathological ways due to colonial frameworks working in tandem with literature, anthropology, and religion; vehicles which serve to, over time, normalize these problematic realities.⁸² The conflation of the Enlightenment's understanding of truth, the division of Christ from his Jewishness, colonial European encounters with people of color, and the mindsets which lead and upheld 19th century slavery have led to a modern gnostic Christ who lacks Jewish flesh, namely, a false godman who has become a figure of the normative of which everything else has become evaluated against. Modern Christianity has come to reflect that being "saved" means becoming like the White, western, normative male. He writes that "Whiteness continues to reign as the inner architecture of modern theology and . . . function[s] as a discourse of death."⁸³

Through his writing, Carter seeks to unearth this false logic and domination, and to ask what it truly means to be Christian in this day and age by asking how it is that Christianity has become a harbinger of the normative. He asserts that, at the heart of this aforementioned

⁸¹ Ibid, 12.

⁸² Ibid, 8, 12. White and Black are not merely signifiers of pigmentation or descriptors, but are rather signifiers of political economy and self-worth. The promotion of White cultural supremacy was used to religiously legitimate European hegemony.

⁸³ Ibid, 377.

racialized gospel is the emphasis on purity,⁸⁴ and states that purity is a colonialistic and nationalistic fantasy.⁸⁵ Carter is arguing that:

...behind the modern problem of race is the problem of how Christianity and Western civilization came to be thoroughly identified with one another, a problem linked to the severance of Christianity from its Jewish roots. As Christianity came to be severed from its Jewish roots, it was remade into the cultural property of the West, the religious basis for justifying the colonial conquest that took off in the fifteenth century with the Portuguese and Spanish, and that reached a zenith in both performance and in intellectual theorization as colonial and intellectual power shifted to France, England, and Germany. Remade into cultural and political property and converted into an ideological instrument to aid and abet colonial conquest, Christianity became a vehicle for the religious articulation of Whiteness, though increasingly masked to the point of near visibility.⁸⁶

Carter does not seek to dismiss tradition, but engage tradition in a new way; rather than a rejection of Christianity, he creates space for a redirection of Christianity.⁸⁷ He begins this trajectory by asserting that: “In order to name and assault more radically the problem of Whiteness, what is needed is an understanding of Christian existence as evergrounded in the Jewish, nonracial flesh of Jesus and thus an articulation of the *covenantal* life of Israel.”⁸⁸ In short, there is more, when rooted in Christ, that the tradition of Christianity has to offer than merely the affirmation of racial binaries: the salvation offered by God offers people the ability to find new identity in the ecstasy of Christ, one that is beyond the worldly order of things such as race.⁸⁹ Carter uses former president Barack Obama’s words “Black, but more than Black” to

⁸⁴ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015). She writes about American Exceptionalism, the notion that the initial European settlers believed that their “American story” was God’s story, and they identified themselves with Israel. Based on this, they scientifically believed that their Anglo-Saxon blood was superior to others, in fact, it was divine and hence the most *pure*, which resulted in their superiority. The vision of God’s mission in the world became indistinguishable from the Anglo-Saxon/European/American vision of freedom, purity, and democracy in a way that alienates people of color from ability to participate, as they are illegitimate and can never be as pure or reflecting of the image of God.

⁸⁵ Great Chain of Being, etc. Jennings. Bantum. Douglas.

⁸⁶ Carter, *Race*, 229-230.

⁸⁷ This is important to note because, for each of these author’s, Muslim and Christian alike, faith plays a key role in the protest of White supremacy.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 192.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 235.

assert that he is not arguing for a rejection of Black identity, but rather is asking what it means for African Americans to be Christians when it can be understood that Jesus empowers humans not to be closed inside of the racial imagination. He writes that:

Christ's life . . . restores the image-status of all persons, affirming and positioning all persons in the person of the eternal Christ, the Son of the Trinity, so as to set them free. . . . In so doing, they take up the theological mandate . . . [to] exit the power structure of Whiteness and of the Blackness (and other modalities of race) that Whiteness created, recognizing that all persons are unique and irreplaceable inflections or articulations . . . of Christ the covenantal Jew, who is the Image of God, the prototype, and who as such is the fundamental articulation, through the Spirit of God, of YHWH the God of Israel, the one whom Jesus called Father. . . . To exist in Christ is to be drawn into [a covenantal] understanding of identity, into the ecstatic and eschatological identity of Israel's covenantal promises. But it is just such a mode of existence that yields freedom . . . free[ing] all beings to be unique articulations of Christ the Image, the prototype, so that together human beings across space and time might constitute a jazz ensemble that riffs upon and improvises within the eternal Word.⁹⁰

Part of this new, Christocentric way forward is envisioning and creating new spaces in literature, politics, economics, etc. Carter calls and empowers theologians to “exit Whiteness and identities Whiteness creates”⁹¹ in order to “narrat[e] being beyond race.”⁹²

While the words of these men are three voices among many, they are three of the most, in my perspective, pivotal voices in the Christian theological conversation on race. Cone, Jennings, and Carter offer three unique ways of understanding racism and Black identity in context to Christianity. Much of this theological work by these three scholars is done out of a deep understanding of their own Black identity and a deep concern for the Jewish identity of Jesus Christ. For Cone, it is a matter of understanding that Jesus was the God of the oppressed, and he stands in solidarity with Black people and fights for their liberation in the present. Jennings moves beyond this assertion to an understanding of Christianity having become conflated with

⁹⁰ Ibid, 250-251.

⁹¹ Ibid, 366.

⁹² Ibid, 378.

colonial tools of oppression, still asserting that Christianity in its most faithful of forms can offer Black Christians a way to reimagine their present circumstances. For Carter, the person of Jesus empowers Christians to reimagine a redeemed view of the human body, and to exists outside of created racial binaries. For each of these authors, it is important to note that they in no way dismiss the realities of the lived Black experience, or seek to use Christianity as a tool to say that “all lives matter” and “we are truly all people.” Rather, in their return to patristics, they hope to draw the Church back to the Jewishness of Christ.

These authors, their bodies, and their work are invaluable to me and should be to many others. However, I am one interpreter among many, one singular person attempting to make the world a better place. In that, it is perhaps valuable to mention critiques I have to offer on these authors. While Cone, in his conveying of these theological notions, makes Christ more accessible to the lived experiences of Black people, he upholds the oppressive binary of White-Black by his assertion that Jesus *is himself* Black. Jennings, in his deep focus on history, discusses the way the Church has become supersessionist and asserts that the Church must return to its Jewish roots in order to redeem the racial conversation. However, what Jennings does not discuss is the intense division within Israel, and whether or not the work of Jesus changes this understanding. Finally, with Carter, though the purpose of an academic monograph is not to give readers practicality, there are limitations to an academic argument without praxis, specifically in terms of how exactly we are to move past race, how exactly we are to reimagine our Christology. How is the Church, now that it is inclusive of gentiles thanks to the work of Christ, supposed to understand/return to its Jewishness? What does that mean? Here, I assert that Critical race theory and new Black theology are hard to critique because they are so "postmodern" and liminal. They can tend to be academic and relatively inaccessible to those without theological training.

Now that I have offered a brief summary of some very specific aspects of these particular Black Christian theologians, I want to move toward something constructive. By putting these voices together, I am asserting that one can understand that Black identity, the lived experience that comes alongside of living in a racialized society, and religion (in this case, Christianity and the person of Jesus) are three inseparable cogs. Cone, Jennings, and Carter convey this indivisibility in different ways, but, nonetheless, they convey an indivisibility between Black bodies, their lived experiences, and Christianity. I have chosen these themes from these authors for the reason that they are parallel to what I have discovered in Islamic theology.

Reverence to Scripture

As previously asserted, one important aspect of faith to people of both these traditions is their scripture. Christians depend on the Bible as a conduit of their faith, and hence, it is important to return to scripture in this conversation on racism. This in mind, it is common for Christians of various backgrounds and denominational backgrounds to assert that the Bible specifically condemns racism.⁹³ From the authors mentioned above, to conservative White Christian theologians such as Dr. Jim Denison, there is little contention that slavery and the subjugation of others is against the Bible.⁹⁴ To begin, Genesis 1-3 tells readers that not only were humans *together* made in the image of God, but that the differentiation and diversity God created is acknowledge as God's good will. Implied in this is that every person was made in the image of God, by the hands of God, for the purpose of God. Reverend Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas makes specific reference to scripture in her book *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of*

⁹³ Some will make the argument that Ham, the son of Noah, was black and black people are specifically condemned and "lesser" because of Ham's sin.

⁹⁴ The nuance is what is meant by subjugation, others, and racism.

God. She makes the claim that God, in the book of Exodus, leads God's people to liberation "from a land where their bodies were being devalued and destroyed." She argues that the God of the Bible is against the subjugation and defilement of the bodies of God's children.⁹⁵ This is because, according to Exodus 3:7-8 "I have indeed seen the affliction of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of the taskmasters, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians." God is a God who, consistent with God's compassionate self, is moved by the bondage of the Israelites, which is the antithesis of the free, divinely created people made in God's image that God intended them to be. Douglas asserts that scripture tells of a God who is, in nature, compassionate and holds universal concern for *all* people.⁹⁶ This translates into an understanding, such as that of Howard Thurman, that based on Biblical evidence "what God did for one race He would surely do for another"⁹⁷ and that God intended all people - including Black people - to "live into the goodness of their very creation."⁹⁸ 1 Samuel 16: 7 affirms that it is not of the Lord to judge a person based on physical appearance, such as race: "But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

The New Testament continues to affirm the divine blessing of the difference of people being valued not only in the person of Jesus, who asserts the importance of Christians loving all and physically stands in solidarity with the marginalized as a Jewish man, but through other texts as well. Douglas asserts how, through the Biblical text, one can see that Jesus was marginalized

⁹⁵ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 137.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 158.

⁹⁷ Howard Thurman, *Deep River: The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Indiana: Friends United Press, 1975), 21.

⁹⁸ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 159.

because of his brown Jewish body, a parallel and divine solidarity with Black marginalized bodies in current times. She likewise makes the assertion that Jesus, through the cross, is standing in solidarity with Black folks who have been lynched - both in the Civil War/Jim Crow eras, but also those lynched now by Police Brutality.⁹⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:13 states: “For we were *all* baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body - whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free - and we were all give the one Spirit to drink.” 1 John 2:11 states: “But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.”

There are many ways that one could use the Bible to assert that Christianity, at its core, is vehemently opposed to racism. The aforementioned verses affirm this assertion, ultimately conveying that the differences of people are good, reflective of the divine and the will of God, and they are not valid reasons to judge someone or see them as lesser.

⁹⁹ Ibid. For example, Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, two of many Black boys who were unfairly and devastatingly killed at the hands of the police and due to police brutality.

Chapter Four: Theological Synthesis

As I begin the chapter where I will synthesize the specific ideologies of Islam and Christianity I have previously explored, it is vital that I assert the following: by drawing parallels and potential intersections for common work against racism for followers of Islam and Christianity, I am not trying to flatten the particularities of these traditions, universalize them, or by any means assert they are the same.¹⁰⁰ To do this would be irreverent, irresponsible, and offensive to adherents of both traditions. However, it would be equally as irresponsible to dismiss the commonalities between Islam and Christianity, in this case, between the realities of Black Muslims and Black Christians, as vital. They exist, and these parallels can and must be held in tension with the tradition's differences, and the differences in experience between Black Muslims and Black Christians.

To recap: the purpose of this study has been to explore and compare theological responses to racialization in the religious traditions of Islam and Christianity in the United States; and, further, to seek opportunity for interfaith collaboration and constructive dialogue that moves those in Islam and Christianity toward the dismantling of racism in the United States. By identifying areas of common ground between Islam and Christianity, there is hope that these two religious traditions can move beyond shared social justice activism and into a place where the conversation is authentic, relational, and generative. Now that we have scratched the surface of what six authors have to say about racism from a theological standpoint faithful to their traditions, we can identify intersecting themes between some of their theologians of color. It is for the purpose of drawing connections between these traditions in terms of the conversation on

¹⁰⁰ Likewise, I am not trying to assert that I am any kind of expert, or have any right to instruct people on the complexities of racism in the United States. It is not my place. I merely seek to synthesize information I have observed and laced together into an understandable format.

race that I selected the authors aforementioned, and likewise chose to emphasize particular aspects of their works. I would be remiss to neglect to assert that all of my following comments on the deconstruction of the system of racism in the United States are in direct response to the theological construct of Whiteness in the United States of America, and there are many ideas and actions beyond the few that I have mentioned which are needed and necessary for the healing of the racial divide and racialization of the United States of America. Likewise, each requires a diverse variety of people to participate, each doing different things: for racism requires many diverse performances and actions to dismantle it, and new ways of performance and actions to declare and develop new identity.

To begin, one parallel value between Black Muslim and Black Christian people is how they address and understand racism in context to their faith is that of bodily identity, or the tie between the physical body and one's identity.¹⁰¹ The aforementioned scholars understand their tradition, their Black bodies, and their identities to be inseparably intertwined; namely, that the body is linked to the soul, and their Black skin is a physical and theological reality. Cone acknowledges that his "interest in the cross and the lynching tree stems from his "identity as a Black person and a Christian struggling to find justice in America today."¹⁰² These academics' Blackness speaks to their identities which speak to their faith, and their faith speaks to their Blackness which speaks to their identities, and so on. This is something that can stand as a common starting place as these two different communities enter into conversation; their Blackness holds theological significance, and their Blackness shapes their identity and the ways

¹⁰¹ Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1996), 3-4. By *identity* I mean the definition as asserted by Stuart Hall. Cultural Theorist Stuart Hall asserts that identity isn't fixed, it is performed. People are always in the process of learning and performing identity; there is no firm identity or solid understanding of who one is. Being in the process of identity means one is acting.

¹⁰² James Cone, *The Cross*, 153. He asserts that the cross is related to one's social reality.

they operate in the world. The importance of their Black identities is not left out of any of the conversations noted before that are held by these six scholars, in their own respective ways; each seems to understand that who they are and what they believe cannot be divided from their experiences. Neither Black Christians nor Black Muslims can divorce themselves from their Black bodies, and nor can they understand their faith as something that does not address or value their Black bodies.

In short: religion informs the bodily identities of Black people from both traditions. Jennings and Carter are specifically known for their assertion that “bodies matter,”¹⁰³ and Cone makes the assertion that Jesus *is* Black, meaning that Jesus’ positionality as a marginalized and “lynched” person renders his body one that holds the experience of Blackness. The three Christian theologians emphasize the need to return to a theological understanding of Christ’s Jewish flesh: a flesh that marks him as someone in a social, historical positionality of oppression much like modern people of color. Likewise, Rouse, though she is hesitant to label a universal narrative, asserts that African American Muslims have a certain shared history based on their oppression by White supremacy, and discusses how Islam has been key in helping Black people to understand their bodies as important and divinely inspired. Jackson affirms the reality of this, and talks of how important Islam has been in helping to restore the humanity of Black people who have been squelched by racism and White supremacy. Khabeer, speaking from her own experience as an embodied Black person existing in the United States, asserts how racism and White supremacy are violent realities for Black people, and how Black Muslims are further alienated on the assumptions of terrorism associated with Islam. All this is to say that the lived experience of Black people and the way their experience informs their identity and likewise their

¹⁰³ Jonathan Tran, 1.

faith is vital to these academics and to the rest of this conversation. It is something that *must* be taken into account when approaching the dismantling of racism. Many African Americans have found that their faith legitimates their value as human beings through religious doctrine about human goodness, which stands in direct protest to and defiance of what racism asserts: that Blacks are lesser, and Whites are superior. This understanding of the body informing identity; of being Black and a person of faith, could stand to be a uniting factor between people of these traditions.

This centering and linking of Blackness, bodies, and identity is important to understand, especially as *dismantling* racism becomes the next necessary step.¹⁰⁴ These people of faith see how their body is bound to their faith, how their faith speaks to their body, and how their body informs their identity and their experiences of life in the US. Seeing the vitality of bodily identity provides an essential perspective to begin addressing racism because it shows that bodies carry significance, power, and are ascribed meaning: it shows the reality of racism as something that is manifest and affecting individuals, communities, and religious communities in negative ways. Identifying the common experience and identity of Blackness between Black people of different faiths emphasizes how much White people need to understand how pervasive a phenomena racism is in the United States: it reveals how White people do not see, understand, nor care about the attitudes they ascribe unfairly to those different from themselves.¹⁰⁵ It also points to the need for the White people in the United States of America to look beyond themselves and seek to understand the ways in which Black bodies are ascribed meaning even in implicit actions, and to

¹⁰⁴ Here, it is vital to mention that I, as a White, overly educated woman, do not have not right to give advice to Black people. In that, I am not presupposing to instruct others on how undo their own subjugation. I am not a practical expert, nor an expert on the subject of racism by any means. However, I can say that I have seen people working against racism, and, as I relay this information and add instruction to White people, I am speaking to work that I myself need to do and ways that I need to act.

¹⁰⁵ Moya and Markus, *Doing Race*, 11. Many White people assert that race does not apply to them, often seeing themselves as neutral, not bearing race, and race and ethnicity as things that people of color must contend with.

act against this hidden violence. White people have a responsibility to see the ways in which their performances upholding the construct of Whiteness viciously harm the bodies of others who are unlike themselves, and notice how asserting statements such as “all lives matter” are detrimental and damaging to the conversation on race. These different academics from different traditions expressing how their body and the things they have witnessed within them shows how Blackness is a reality, one that is affirmed by religion; it likewise shows how White supremacy is a reality, one that is protested by religion in its most faithful forms. While social construction has various discursive meanings connected to identity and performance, it is clear that, as racism actively assigns meaning to bodies and identity, it has negative consequences for Black people.

Another parallel in the way that both Muslim and Christian scholars discuss racism in the United States is their respective reverence to scripture. It is undeniable that, in both traditions, the importance of scripture and the value of religious virtue as recounted in their respective texts are non-negotiables. For Muslims, their adherence to the words of Allah and Mohammad, and following the virtues spoken of in these texts are key to those who practice the tradition, and likewise key in how Muslim theologians discuss racism. Rouse writes:

An example of this is the Quranic ayah or verse, “O Mankind! We created you from a single (pair), of a male and female, and made you into Nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (Not that ye may despise each other). Verily, the most honoured of you is (he who is) the most Righteous of you” (49:13). This ayah celebrates men and women of different races and ethnicities as equal in the eyes of God; for African American Muslims this ayah has been contrasted with the biblical story of Ham, which has been used by White supremacists to justify racism. For many African American Muslims, the choice of faith is understood as a choice between the Quran, interpreted as affirming racial and gender equality, or the Bible, which has been used to legitimate racial hierarchies.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Haddad and Smith, 94.

This reverence for the Qur'an in this conversation on racism for Muslim theologians is equivalent to, though not the same as, the Christian reverence for Scripture in the conversation on racism. Similarly to the emphasis on scripture as key in Islam, the Bible is vital for both Christianity and the aforementioned Christian theologians' addressing of racism. Cone fearlessly asserts that the Bible is the word of God which conveys not only that all people are made in the image of God, but that God is on the side of the oppressed and Jesus is in solidarity with the marginalized and downtrodden, a reality of who God is that is revealed through the Christian Bible. In short, both scriptures affirm that God made all people different and yet good. With this said: Muslims and Christians should not assume that these texts are the same or that these books have all of the answers to modern day contextual issues in a specific sense. Rather, noted between Black people of these two traditions is that their scriptures are important in the way that they view life, and it is with regard to this scripture that they approach addressing issues such as racism.

This reverence to scripture is an important tool in the dismantling of racism for the following reasons. First, it enables Black Muslims and Christians to have their identity bound to something beyond themselves, rather than the social institutions of the United States that project unfair identity on them.¹⁰⁷ Both traditions are reverent to these holy texts, and these holy texts can help people to *unperform* racism, in both communal and social ways, in the sense that a reverence to scripture empowers Blacks to operate out of an understanding of their identity as prescribed by tradition, one that is baptized by the Divine, as opposed to what is designated for them by White supremacy. Sherman A. Jackson asserts that to subvert White supremacy, one must understand the Qur'an, which itself condemns racism as it reveals Black people to be a part

¹⁰⁷ James Cone, *The Cross*, 18. Cone calls this "hope," asserting that as the blues gave Black people a way to protest White supremacy, religion (Christianity) offers them hope.

of Allah's divine will. It can also stand to convict White people that they have, indeed, colonized religion, and so much of their theological tenants and attitude are unfaithful to the texts they cling to so tightly. Instead of scarcity and oppression, a return to scripture for what God believes about the innate value of Black folks has stood as a liberating factor for these academics, and could likewise do the same for other people of color and the colonized imaginations of White Christians.

With this trajectory in mind, it would be helpful to examine these two texts' telling of the genesis of creation. The Qur'an tells its adherents that "humanity is naught but a single nation," that Allah created humanity from a single pair, and it was Allah's intention that humanity transform into many diverse tongues and tribes for the betterment of people.¹⁰⁸ Likewise, it is written that Allah has no partiality or favorites: there is no creature or human that Allah prefers over another. Allah cares for *all*. In fact, the prophet Muhammed (may peace and blessings be upon him) writes: "O mankind, your Lord is One and your Father is One. You all descended from Adam, and Adam was created from earth. He is most honored among you in the sight of God who is most upright. No Arab is superior to a non-Arab, no colored person to a White person, or a White person to a colored person...."¹⁰⁹ In the Bible, readers are told that humanity is made in God's image, in God's likeness,¹¹⁰ and that the diversity of creation is a part of God's good plan. In both these scenarios, the divine *values* the body as good, and *values* the different experiences of people, and speaks a narrative of hope, possibility, and the rejection of superiority of one over another. James Cones notes that Black people "...found in the cross the spiritual power to resist the violence they so often suffered.... Faith was on the one thing White people

¹⁰⁸ 2:213, 30:22, 49:13

¹⁰⁹ Ahmad and At-Tirmithi

¹¹⁰ 1:26

could not control or take from them.”¹¹¹ Likewise, Cone notes that “They identified God’s liberation of the poor as the central message of the Bible...”¹¹² It enables a different narrative, a different way to perform identity than that of White superiority, one that is bound to a text’s portrayal of a caring God instead of the signifier of Whiteness as divine.

Furthermore, according to the six academics addressed earlier on in this paper, racism is vehemently and viciously opposed to the core of their faith traditions, and their respective faith traditions are ways that Black people have found humanity in the face of oppression. Black faith is, by each of the six authors, in their own particular and contextual ways, asserted to be a narrative of protest and resistance of White supremacy and racism: it is a counternarrative to the identities forced upon and likewise striped from Black people by the construct of racism. In short, the internalization of the true values of these two traditions and the subsequent practicing of these tenets is a way for Black people to both protest racism, work against it, and see beyond it. Carter writes that “Christ’s life . . . restores the image-status of all persons, affirming and positioning all persons in the person of the eternal Christ, the Son of the Trinity, so as to set them free. . .” Carolyn Moxley Rouse, in a similar vein, writes: “Always attentive to constraint and empowerment, the exegetical approach of African American Islam is deeply influenced by both the refusal to legitimate mainstream categories of difference while also embracing those categories as necessary for understanding the values of the faith and mobilizing around those values.”¹¹³ Hence, a common faith in and adherence to tradition cultivates inward and external resistance towards the performance, narrative, and construct that is racialization. In both traditions, there is both a practical and theological focus on liberation, a focus that stems from

¹¹¹ James Cone, *The Cross*, 22.

¹¹² Ibid, 118.

¹¹³ Haddad and Smith, 89.

and is embodied by the respective traditions. There is, in this focus on liberative theology and action, a condemnation of oppressive theology and practice. There is a push to return to orthodox theology before it was conflated with and influenced by colonialism, the Enlightenment, and White supremacy. While, theologically, this return to orthodoxy and an orthodox orthopraxy perhaps looks different for Islam and Christianity, there is no question that the six Black academics in the particular sections of their work I have addressed prior assert that faithful service to God and God's person, morals, and virtues renders racism and White supremacy blasphemous, demonic, and against the Divine will, and hence, the enactment of morals, virtues, service to God's person, and right belief stand as protests unto White supremacy.

It is clear that faith, belief in God, practice of this faith, and a value of following to the best of one's understanding the trajectory of the Divine are powerful and important pillars in both Islam and Christianity, and have been cited by author's on both sides as ways Black people have protested and can continue to protest racism and White supremacy in the United States of America. Tradition, a reverence and participation in one's own as well as a respect for another tradition, cultivates resistance to the performance and narrative of White supremacy and the construct or racialization, as it centers an individual's, community's, and communities' identities in the caring Divine of these traditions, a Divine who, in both cases, cares for people and believes in the goodness of differentiation as well as equality between differences, rather than the violent and colonial identifier of White supremacy. While this is found for Black Muslims and Black Christians in different ways, through different texts, theologies, and belief systems, there is a common thread that both Christianity and Islam have enabled Black people to protest and resist White supremacy.

Creatively moving forward and uniting in the face of the tension and turmoil of a divided, hostile landscape does not require Christians and Muslims to agree with one another's faiths, conflate them, or assert they are worshipping the same God. However, as both traditions lend to their Black theologians' specific understandings of themselves that defy and go above the construct of racism, there is the space for Black Christians and Muslims to affirm their own humanity and the humanity in one another and reject the god that is White supremacy.

Chapter Five: Praxis: Reflections and Potential Framework for Ministry

Since 1984, Father Thomas Keating has been organizing what is known as the Snowmass Interreligious Conference, “one of the world’s longest-running interreligious conferences.” In 2004, Netanel Miles-Yeppez edited the book *The Common Heart: An Experience of Interreligious Dialogue* in order to invite others into the group’s reflection on twenty years (at the time) of conversation. In *The Common Heart*, the reader is invited to the roundtable discussion of religious leaders from a variety of different traditions including but not limited to Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Native American indigenous spirituality. At this table, there are points of agreement. A few examples are: each religion is seeking an Ultimate Reality in their own way and name, faith is responding to this Ultimate Reality, disciplined practice is essential to spiritual life, as are the practices of compassion, service to others, and morality/virtue.¹¹⁴ However, finding commonality isn’t necessarily the point of this conversation: the round table discussion of Snowmass is one where all are free to share their perspectives and traditions freely, but without trying to convert one another. It is a time of bonding over similarities and listening over differences, seeing diversity as good things. The conversation is about love, working together despite looking and acting differently than one another, and building friendship across lines that are not usually crossed.

It is this model that inspires my practical application: what I envision after writing and studying as a practical genesis to applying this research is a round table discussion between Black adherents of these two traditions. Though these faiths do not believe and practice the same things, both Islam and Christianity have collected Black folks who have found religion to be a salvific refuge and catalyst against White supremacy and racism in the United States. A round

¹¹⁴ Netanel Miles-Yeppez, ed., *The Common Heart: An Experience of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York, NY: Lantern Press, 2006), xvii-xviii.

table conversation could stand as a catalyst to respecting and valuing how these different traditions have enabled Black folks to condemn racism and find humanity in a system that is hostile to their bodily existence. Hosting and participating in interfaith dialogue through a roundtable forum could reassert and reaffirm how faith is a continued protest and has the possibility of continuing to be a form of protest against White supremacy and racism. Grounded in the mutual understanding that scripture tells, where all people are equal, there is the possibility of relationship building and a shared narrative of oppression and faith being a valuable way for people on both sides to move forward through the maze of racism in the United States. In this, it is important to acknowledge that while Black Muslims and Christians may have common experiences in terms of their bodies, identities, and how these inform one another, and in passion for how their faith has enabled them to see themselves as Black *and* good despite what racism and its internalization may claim, it is *vital* for members to not gloss over differences. For while there are certainly parallels in how these Black academics aforementioned experience Blackness and faith, there are intense differences in theology and worldview that should not be overlooked.

This all stands to further support the notion that White people need to decolonize their theology. The concept that White people need to forcefully and intentionally act against racism in the USA is the most important point that this paper seeks to assert.¹¹⁵ For White people to do this, it is vital they understand it is not the task of Black folks, Muslim or Christian, to educate White people on racism, its history, and how to change it; White people have access to literature and theology written in and out of their own traditions. It is likewise not the task of Black people or people of color to dismantle racism. White people must work to understand how they perform racism, in order to *unperform* racism; there is a call for White people to creatively consider what

¹¹⁵ To be candid and put it into laymen's terms: White people need to get their shit together.

their faith really means, and who their God really is. While there is not enough space to fully develop the *work* and *self-education* I affirm White people *must* do to understand the performance of racism, I have a number of suggestions for tangible actions that are pieces to dismantling racism. All of these different suggestions I have listed below are steps in the right direction: they are everyday things that White people can do that work against racism and decolonize their theology.

For example, one simple economic way that White people can act against racism that is implicit in the United States is to refuse to buy goods (clothes, groceries, etc.) from places where racism has been institutionalized and where the image of the divine in people is not affirmed.¹¹⁶ Instead, they could collaborate and create a list of local Black shop owners to buy their products from. As racism is a social construct and a system that favors Whites over Blacks, White people consuming their goods from companies that empower and are owned by Black people is a rejection of White supremacy and way to act in opposition to White people holding power and benefitting unfairly in the economic arena. It is one way that White people can seek to affirm the goodness of Black bodies and the Divine beauty of diversity.

Another way that White people can seek to decolonize their theology and to reject racism is to understand that racism is implicit in the US educational system as well, often favoring White students and Enlightenment inspired ideas of learning and thinking over other ways of

¹¹⁶ While it can be difficult to identify these institutions, it is still possible to do so. Some helpful questions in deciphering who these institutions are stand as follows: Do they serve a client base that is ethnically diverse, but their leadership or board representations lack diverse people? Are they open or willing to hear and implement the suggestions, feedback, and critiques from individuals or communities of color? Does their leadership openly ignore racial issues, or lack a history of advocating for equality? Does the institution provide equal opportunities for people of color? Does the institution seek to employ people of color? Do people of color earn the same salaries as their white coworkers? Do white employees receive more opportunities to increase their skill level or receive training? Do they have diversity education? Are they diligent in seeking to notice inequities? Are they giving money to or backing a specific person who is racist? Are they collaborating closely with institutions that are?

understanding or existing.¹¹⁷ Hence, another step White people can take in order to decolonize their theology and their actions, based on a firm belief in tradition¹¹⁸ and the Divine, White people begin pushing for things such as Black authors to be included in curriculum and syllabi, Black ideas and experiences to be included, and, even beyond the favoring of marginalized voices in terms of literature, giving floor to marginalized students (without forcing it upon them or using them as a token) and allowing their voices, perspectives, and selves to be heard. These broad suggestions are simple ways for White people in Islam and Christianity¹¹⁹ to push for the reflection the aforementioned belief in both traditions that every person bears the image of the Divine within them, and deserves to be heard and have the opportunity to thrive. This push for the undoing of racism could likewise include White people and White faith adherents pushing for schools and teachers to offer other ways of showing understanding and intelligence in schoolwork, such as the ability to create art projects or do math in a storytelling form, not grading points off for things like dialect or coding, and having an understanding of times of fasting placed into the curriculum. This small thing in and of itself is a rejection that the White ideal of Enlightenment style thinking is not the only way for one to prove intelligence, and that there are a variety of beautiful cultures and understandings coexisting in the world. Likewise, White Muslims and Christians could push for teachers to explain why language and viewpoint matters, why Black lives matter, and incorporate these views into their lessons, spending less time teaching the dominant White Christian viewpoint.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ This goes back to the notions of colonialism and the Great Chain of Being; see Willie James Jennings.

¹¹⁸ The aforementioned reverence to Scripture and reverence to the virtues and tenants of each particular tradition.

¹¹⁹ And White people in general. For White people outside these traditions, however, these actions of protest and undoing would perhaps not be grounded in scripture or an understanding that the image of God resides in every person.

¹²⁰ One philosophy of education in this line is called Critical Pedagogy, which is a social movement that has taken the concepts of critical theory and teaches children to challenge domination and achieve critical consciousness. It asserts that social justice is not a separate entity from teaching and learning, and encourages children to change the

Lastly, one other way that White folks in churches and mosques could begin to dismantle racism in the United States and decolonize their theology is for White pastors and faith leaders to incorporate theologians of color into their sermons and lessons, which would require these faith leaders to explore and retain what they have gathered from these theologians of color. This perhaps looks like doing extensive research of many forms into literature and resources that exist written by Black people, such as the six author's mentioned before, and using the work of Black theologians or prophets in their daily devotions and explorations. This likewise means returning to scripture to, as aforementioned, see the ways in which the text discusses the beauty of diversity and the goodness of all people, the basics of faith, and the historical, Jewish person of Jesus and his positionality as someone both marginalized and in solidarity with the oppressed. This task of decolonizing likewise includes the calling out of the self and the White people in their congregations on microaggressions, implicit bias, and theology that favors their own culture and body over that of Black people.¹²¹ Perhaps it could mean the Church or Mosques having an accountability group for white people,¹²² and could even mean the pursuit of White leadership stepping down to enable Black people to hold positions of leadership in houses of faith.¹²³

The aforementioned possibilities are exactly that: possibilities, suggestions, and practical recommendations that are merely scratching the surface of much larger and more complex conversations and actions that are ways of working against racism in the United States and in the

world through social critique and political action. Critical Pedagogy was developed by Paulo Freire in order that education might show solidarity with the poor and teach learners of humanity's common struggles.

¹²¹ For instance, referencing back to Willie James Jennings, offering salvation to others or converting Black people to Christianity became conflated with converting Blacks to European culture. Are there ways in which the modern Church carries out this view in its approach to mission trips or ministry?

¹²² I suggest this because of a previous comment I have made: it is not the task or responsibility of people of color to call White people out on microaggressions, upholding racist systems, or to educate them on the history of racism. That is White people's own responsibility.

¹²³ This action would be a recognition of the way the system of race favors, believes in, and gives power and opportunity to White people at the expense of Black people and other people of color, and a tangible, physical rejection and reparation of that inequity.

traditions of Islam and Christianity. There is not a single solution to dismantling racism or decolonizing theology, nor are any of these suggestions going to, alone, solve the problem of racism. However, though I am merely opening up possibilities in a wide range of areas, what they do have in common is being potential practices that contribute to the dismantling of racism and decolonizing of theology in the United States.

In conclusion: racism, the oppression of others based on the social construct of race and the creation of the notion of a lesser being based on skin color, has become conflated with the identity of the United States of America and right-wing politics. Fear mongering and rhetoric that dismisses the humanity of others is rampant in our current presidential administration, and the dismissal of others we do not understand or know has become an all-too-familiar practice within the bounds of northern America. This, among the other “isms” that plague our society today (sexism, heteronormativism, classism, ageism, ableism) is something that must not only be addressed but actively worked against. In this, it is vital that those from religious communities be included in this conversation, and are able to come into the conversation as their whole selves, bearing and being safe to assert their whole theological beliefs. Faith cannot and must not be withheld from conversations on race. As we have explored in the bounds of this research, there are many Black Muslim and Christian people who have discussed racism and racialization theologically in the United States, and what racism has meant for Black folks. There are parallels and commonalities within these two very different faith traditions that could stand as launching pads for interfaith collaboration and deep social justice work towards the humanity of people of color in the United States of America.

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